FAITH-HEELER

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

"If you will (aikev) listen to these judgments and observe and do them" (Devarim 7:12)

The word "aikev" is not an unusual word, except in this context. The simplest definition of the word is "heel," as in the heel of one's foot, which is what prompts Rashi to proffer his explanation of the usage of this word in this context:

"If you will listen to the 'easy' mitzvos that people tend to trample on with their heels (i.e., not take seriously)Š" (Rashi)

The Ba'al HaTurim is interested in the word for its gematria, which is 172 (ayin-kuf-bais) -- the number of words found on the first set of Tablets that Moshe Rabbeinu brought down from Mt. Sinai, and subsequently broke. This, explains the Pri Tzaddik, is one way the Torah keeps the connection between us and the First Tablets alive, among other lessons.

However, the word "aikev" itself may be an allusion to "Acharis Yomim," the "End-of-Days" -- the last part of Jewish history, as we will now explain.

Kabbalah's view of history is different from the Western world's. From the Western point of view, though cause-and-effect have played a role in the way history and mankind have evolved, there is very little spiritual basis for any of it. Western man has yet to really sort out any real rhyme or reason for how we arrived at to where we are today, other than the fact that, well, we just did.

Torah says no: The rhyme and reason for history is both elegant and exceedingly deep, and, quite understandable, if you know the premises and axioms that run it. In fact, there is a direct correlation between the "body" of history and the body of man, as follows:

0 - 1000 ---- Right Arm (Chesed)
1000 - 2000 ---- Left Arm (Gevurah)
2000 - 3000 ---- Torso (Tifferes)
3000 - 4000 ---- Right Leg (Netzach)
4000 - 5000 ---- Left Leg (Hod)

Now, though the Sixth Millennium also corresponds to a body part with respect to the Sefiros

(something that is beyond the scope of "Perceptions" to explain), it is already sufficient clear that moving through history is like moving from the top part of a person's body to the lower part. And, if the year 6000 is the last year of history as we know it (Sanhedrin 97a), then, sometime close to that year should correspond to, well, the "heels" of history, and what is referred to as, the "Heels of Moshiach."

Hence, our connection between "aikev" of this parshah and the "aikev" of history, or, as it is better known: Acharis Yomim, when adhering to mitzvos, especially with the right intentions will be very hard to do.

The Ohr HaChaim explains that "aikev" refers to the end of the time of mitzvah-performance (which, for all intents-and-purposes is Yemos HaMoshiach), the true time for simchah. "It will not be right for the person, who will stand before the Great King in embarrassment, to be in joy Š" the Ohr HaChaim warns. Mitzvah-observance NOW means ultimate joy THEN.

"Acharis Yomim" has another name: Ais Ziknah -- the time of our old age. The Jewish people have been around for over three thousand years now, and, it has been far from an easy journey through time. Quite the contrary! we have been a battered nation, and still taking our licks to this very day. We are old and weary -- even the young among us -- and ready to "retire" from Torah-observance, G-d forbid!

The Torah, in this week's parshah is pleading with us, "Don't give up! Stay with it until the very end." In Selichos, we plead to G-d not to abandon us in our time of old age. Here, the Torah pleads with the Jewish people, "Don't abandon me in your old age!" and reminds us of all the wonderful blessings that follow for such loyalty: fulfillment of the covenant made with our Forefathers, increased blessing family-wise and living-wise, and freedom from all the illnesses of the world.

Given the present predicament of the Jewish people, it would be worthwhile to apply this parshah to our generations as well.

Shabbos Day:

The graven images of their gods you must burn with fire. Do not desire the sil-ver or gold that is on them, nor take it, in case it snares you; it is disgusting to G-d, your G-d. You must never bring an offensive thing into your house, otherwise you will be come like it. Avoid it; it is taboo. (Devarim 7:25-26)

These possukim represent two negative mitzvos, namely, to not derive any benefit from any decoration or ornament from an idol, and, to not derive any benefit from an idol, its offerings, its attendants, or anything done for it. And, unlike other mitzvos in the Torah, here, on the spot, the reasoning is provided: You will become like it.

This point underscores the remarkable relationship that exists between what we own and what we become. It is absolutely remarkable -- and frightening -- how influential the inanimate world is on our lives:

"All financial acquisitions have relevance to the root of a person's soul, and they can cause a person to sin; when a person sacrificed them on the altar, the fire of the altar burned them up and purified the person's soul." (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 493)

We are not so aware of how our physical actions impact our spiritual reality, though, as we see here, there is a direct cause-and-effect relationship between the two. People think that they can be exposed to negative influences, especially only for a short duration, and walk away spiritually unscathed. They think that they can purchase something that is spiritually defective, and somehow maintain enough spiritual distance from it to hold their moral ground. They are wrong -- dead wrong.

I am going to say something controversial, though I try hard not to do that in "Perceptions" (I save THAT for "An Even Bigger Picture"). However, in this context, it is difficult not to.

There is a lot of lack of belief in G-d today, and even less fear of angering Him, including among the Jewish people. Why? So, many people believe it is because science and archeology have given us enough evidence to place belief in G-d in the doubtful category, meaning that it is intellectually difficult to believe in G-d.

However, that has never been true, and today, even more so is that not the case. In fact, I recently saw a video produced by the BBC about the "anthropomorphic principle," which makes it intellectually difficult NOT to believe in G-d. Not only that, but, the scientists interviewed, some of the top in the world who have accepted this fact, said, that any of their colleagues who refuse to accept the fact of a "Designer" of creation have simply stuck their heads in the intellectual sand!

But, that is where they have stuck them, and, seemingly, that is where they choose to leave them. Why?

Because, no matter how bright a person is, no matter how great a genius he has become, he still has a soul within his body. And, G-d has set up creation in such a way as to make everything count, and therefore, to have consequence. "You are what you eat" and you are what you buy because we have free-will to either accept or reject that which is good for us and that which is bad for us. That's the test of life.

The Torah is warning here: Know that you entire perspective on life will be colored by your choices. If you choose good, then you will see good, and you will pursue G-d. If you choose spiritual depravity, then, you will see a G-dless world, and, be a victim of your own blindness. What you will "buy" from that world is more than just "idols" and "ornaments" -- it is an entire philosophy that you will absorb through spiritual osmosis.

This was part of the purging process inherent in offering sacrifices. By purchasing an animal as a Sin-

Offering, a person was spiritually transferring the spiritual impurity he had previously picked up, which led him to sin. Burning the animal on the holy altar was a way to spiritually sever the person's connection to the impurity, at the root of his soul itself.

Today, we don't have the altar, and there is very little to replace it, short of doing teshuvah. Self-sacrifice for Torah does help tremendously, but, if a person does very little in the way of either, then, he or she just gets swept up in their materialistic world, becoming more fuzzy about G-d and truth. And, from where they stand, they just can't see why anyone would believe in something so spiritual as G-d, and something so archaic as Torah.

Unfortunately, it will take a spiritual shopping spree and a change of intellectual perception before they will be able to answer these questions for themselves.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

Food and Jews seem to go together, at least in modern times. I remember how, when I first moved to Eretz Yisroel, Meah Shearim barely had one fast food shop. Now, almost every other store is a falafel store, or pizza shop, or something to do with food.

And, Shabbos, and simchas Š what spreads! Food like never before. It is amazing how central a role food plays today in making simchas "work" (as I drink my coffee and enjoy my piece of cake Š). It is almost as if we are rebounding from all the decades of poverty and starvation that we suffered in more difficult times. Acceptance among the non-Jews and affluence has made eating and eating well an easy part of being Jewish.

As a result of this, and other more materialistic issues, the concept of dieting has become quite integrated in the Jewish mind today, on all levels of observance. As a teacher of just-about-to-begin-dating young women, and, even younger girls than that, it is rather distressing how much emphasis is being placed on becoming VERY thin, and remaining so. From many discussions, it seems that the reasoning has little to do with health, especially since it often results in erratic and even dangerous eating habits.

The Rambam would not have approved.

There is no question that so much of Judaism lends itself to eating. As a young yeshivah student, I first began to gain weight (after so many years of never gaining a pound) attending so many simchas back-to-back. I didn't always want to eat, well, at least THAT much, but, it was a "mitzvah." And, since making after blessings requires consumption of at least an "egg's-worth" of food -- often cakes or cookies -- I ate just that (and more, just to be safe).

Sometimes, the bris took place straight after the morning service, when, we had yet to have

breakfast and were quite hungry. We were sitting ducks; self-control under such conditions was almost non-existent. I gained the rest of my weight eating leftovers from Shabbos I didn't want to throw out, after serving more food to the guests than they could have ever eaten. And, we're modest compared to other homes. At one home, I was "forced" (I had to be a polite guest Š) to eat so much at the Friday night meal that I had to go to sleep sitting up!

The Rambam would definitely not have approved.

I think we have paid too much attention to the first part of the posuk:

Š man does not live by bread alone Š

-- when it is the second part of the posuk that holds the most meaning:

Š but by whatever G-d says should exist does man live.

It is as my Rosh HaYeshivah used to ask us: Are you eating to live, or, living to eat? Or, as the Nefesh HaChaim asked long ago: Do you make your brochah in order to be able to eat, or, do you eat in order to be able to make your brochah? When you eat to live, and you eat to make a blessing, then, you are clearly in This World to serve G-d, and to bring creation to its holy completion. Eating, for such people, is a mundane means to a holy end, even when they thoroughly enjoy what they are eating.

However, when we do just the opposite, not only do we complicate our health situation and spend money unnecessarily on something we don't need, but, in the words of one rav, we eat our way out of the World-to-Come. For, physical pleasure in This World, though perfectly permissible when enjoyed in the correct halachic context, is meant only as a lovely by-product of serving G-d. When it becomes an end unto itself, it becomes OUR end unto itself.

Lest we forget, the sin that started us off on the wrong track, way back at the beginning of history, back in the Garden of Eden, involved eating. And, seeing how, as of 1990, we entered a period of history that corresponds to the hour on Day Six that Adam ate from the Tree, we would do well to consider, and re-consider our eating habits -- be they physical OR intellectual.

MELAVE MALKAH:

Sing joyfully, O righteous, because of G-d; for the upright, praise is fitting. (Tehillim 33:1)

This is the last official tehillah unique to the Shabbos Pesukei d'Zimra -- Shabbos Introductory Psalms.

According to the Malbim, there is a progression in this verse, from righteous people to upright people. What is the difference? The difference, as we have seen in various places, is that

righteousness can be a relative concept. Next to his generation, Noach was righteous. However, as many commentators teach, next to Avraham, his level of righteousness wouldn't have appeared so great.

However, uprightness is a fixed value. As the Talmud teaches, everything they do is perfect and everlasting (Sotah 9a). The Talmud asks,

Why is it (Bereishis) called "The Book of the Upright"? Because, it is about Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov, who are called "upright." (Avodah Zarah 25a)

These were certainly people whose deeds are eternal, people who will known unfathomable joy at the "End of Days."

The word for fitting is "na'avah." However, the Talmud wants to read the word without its "aleph," which transforms the word into "naveh," which means "abode," as in, Heavenly Abode. This is to teach that upright people build holy things in this world, which the enemy is never able to desecrate. This is why, even though Nebuchadnetzar was able to destroy the Temple, the gates, which were a tribute to Dovid HaMelech, sank into the ground prior to the enemies' conquest.

Thank G-d with the Kinor, with the Neivel Ossur sing to Him. (2)

Musical instruments are remarkable things, and represent such a positive manipulation of the physical world by man. This is how man sanctifies the world to make it "holy to G-d," by causing it to "sing" praise to G-d as well.

Sing Him a new song Š (3)

Never stop being inspired. Creation, on an ongoing basis, is one miracle after another, and every conscious moment must be spent in appreciation, by making the most of life. When our actions express this appreciation, then, by their very nature, they become "shirah," holy song to G-d!

Š play well with anguished cries Š

In This World, while things can still go wrong and suffering can still occur, the upright find a way to turn adversity into praise of G-d as well. Nothing makes G-d sadder than to watch His people suffer, and nothing pains Him more than to allow mankind destroy good -- temporarily -- in order to maintain the mandate of creation: free-will.

However, as we have seen throughout our long history, through the likes of the Ten Martyrs who died horrible deaths at the hands of the Romans, loyalty to G-d to the very last moment also is a form of praise. And, lest you think that such uprightness is reserved only for people of such Biblical proportion, there are countless stories of such self-sacrifice during the pogroms and the Holocaust (Rachmanah Litzlan).

Some people see them only as "sheep led to the slaughter." However, the Nazis (yemach shemum!)

were forced to witness the undying Jewish spirit as they walked to their deaths singing songs like, "You have chosen from among the nations Š"

What follows are many words of praise which speak of G-d's kindness, His charity, His justice, and how He created the entire world with a single breath. The psalmist speaks of G-d's greatness by showing how easily He formed that which we hold in awe, or, at least ought to. But, these lines sum it up:

Happy is the nation who G-d is Hashem, the nation He chose for His own inheritance (12) Š Behold, the eye of G-d is on those who fear Him, upon those who wait for His kindness (18) ... For in Him will our hearts be glad, for in His Holy Name we trusted (21) Š

I recall a story once told to me by a Ba'al Teshuvah, many years after changing the course of his life by 180 degrees. Having been raised a reform Jew, he had been leading a pretty intense secular life, until he dared to intellectually challenge a friend of his, who had made a similar change years earlier. He recounted:

"If I had known at the time where the conversation would end up, I wouldn't have started it. If someone had told me then that I would find more pleasure in G-d than all the things I was doing at the time, I would have shown them a concerned look and questioned their sanity. But it's true! And, how grateful am I that G-d had enough patience to wait for me, without which I would still only be experiencing the mundane pleasures of secular life Š"

Have a great Shabbos,
Pinchas Winston
